signet

signet 2008

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It's Tricky

John Pennington

I long for a poem with meter and rhyme,
Instead of the free verse I see all the time.
I guess it's too hard,
For a legitimate bard,
"To rock a rhyme that's right on time..."[1]

"It's Tricky" by Run D.M.C. [1]

Eucharist

Lauren DeReese

I was Nine
A bride for Christ
A breeder for the crusade

Choking on gross impatience
Swallowing my pride
Puckering like sour grapes
"You must learn the ways of God,
Catechism Can Save."

I was Nine
A wayward lamb
A wanton soul

I want to spit it out
That mouth full of God
Constantly clinging to my little palate
Salty, sweet
Salvation is sickening

1991

Lindsay Full

I stood there as the fashion icon of
my kindergarten class, pants as red

as Snow White's lips,
with stirrups holding them in place.

I had to peel them off
like Saran Wrap

in order to use
the restroom.

My mom gave me Grandma's
hand sewn wool

sweater--baggy and grey--
to wear like a dress.

My hair flopped on the tip top
of my crown and my bangs were teased

six inches from my forehead with ten ounces
of hairspray holding them securely in place.

At five years old and four
feet three inches tall, I was oblivious

to the fact I would never
become prom queen.

The Fighter

Carissa Orlando

Joe was born with boxing gloves
And knuckles clenched and white.
It was almost as if he knew the world
Would require him to fight.

His mother liked her liquor,
And his father, just for fun,
Would send his fists a-flying.
Joe fought back, but rarely won.

He stood his ground for fifteen years
And in the final round,
Gave his dad a bloody nose
And quickly fled the town.

Joe fought to find a place to live,
He fought for food to eat,
He fought for a job to pay the bills,
And keep him off the street.

He fought so hard, and finally
He got his life on track.
He even found a girl to love
Who said she loved him back.

They lived together peacefully;
She held him through the night.
But sadly, peace would never last,
And the two began to fight.

They screamed across the living room,
The neighbors heard them well.
He told her he would fight for her,
She told him, "Go to hell."

And when she left for good, Joe knew
His fighting days were done,
And throwing in his gloves, succumbed
To the triumph of his gun.

Those of us who knew of him
Could do little much but cry
For this tragic tale of a fighting man
Who never said goodbye.

Collection

Bridget Hatfield

The marbles slicked between his
dirtied boy fingers.
His face squished and wrinkled.
It wasn't a game his young
untrained brain or body understood.
The colors are what attracted him,
swirled or solid it didn't matter,
Josiah was starting a collection

Searching under rocks,
behind the fridge,
wedged between the couch cushions,
up high on the top bunk,
down low in the hole in the back yard
freshly dug this morning…
no luck.

Disappointed, he turned his search
to money. If he couldn't find
marbles he certainly could buy
some, brand new he imagined,
his green eyes in the sunshine.

Although the cracks
from screeching over concrete
gave each marble character,
new, fresh from the factory,
marbles would do too.
A collection was a collection,
no matter the age.

Money was easy.
He remembered seeing coins
in all of his looking spots.
His pockets filled fast,
an easy collection.
Jingling pockets
made their way to the store.

Quickly Josiah's money collection
was gone.
He didn't fret, ambitious,
working for his goal.
A new collection was in its place.

Complete.
The scratched glass snuggled close,
tucked away, in a brown paper bag
with the new perfect marbles.
Josiah's six year old mind moved on,

curious and wandering as always,
on to greater things;
like Band Aids,
used ones.
Josiah was going to start a collection

Calender

Leslie Pitman

Somewhere between the mysteries and memories
(the things you know and the things you never
knew, respectively) We stopped counting.

Hours when, Days until, Years since
They always start our sentences.
But not anymore

We haven't just paused
No, we stopped.
Somewhere between the seconds and sunsets—

Counting what? Counting days
d o w n
And drowning in reality.

Move on, move up, move out
They scream:
Deafening, hopeful, and honest

But we'll always be counting,
Even if silently
And in our heads.

The Voice

L. Brekke

The little monster that lives
in the pit of my stomach
sneaks about
and whispers in my ear.

She is wily and sly.
When you tell me that you spent
this month's rent on beer
I just shake my fist and whine
that you are irresponsible.
But she yells.
She rattles the bars
of her cage in my stomach.
I don't yell.
She would not be so kind.
She did not listen to grandmother's rules.
She would slam your soft, empty head
against the bedroom wall
and flatten your windpipe against
your vertebra,
laughing as you slide down the wall
like melting ice cream.

Tomato

Jennifer S. Daniel

I bite into mother summer.
Nearly giving way, the pulp
presses against the jewel-ripe
skin as the next fruit awaits
the tip-prick of my knife.
Red juices bleed through
my fingers into the white
of my bowl, awaiting
their sisters – salt and sweet
basil. I see the bowl,
now pregnant with the elements
of the season, and crave
to be full of the fundamental
ingredients of life.

Another Exodus

Jennifer S. Daniel

"...not a green thing remained, neither tree nor plant of field..." – Exodus 10:15

I remember how the intermittent rain
had fallen on the hard-packed
dirt where the newly-sown seeds
had not yet germinated but instead washed
away in the floods of the humid spring,
unable to save the yard from the drought
of winter leaving it only sparsely patched
with scraps of grass like a worn quilt.

The cherubic cheeks of my baby sister
were cooled by sleep while my ever-
martyred mother sobbed into a suitcase
as she began our next migration
and my father, standing in that desert
yard and baptized with rainwater, screamed
Gook! at imaginary slant-eyed soldiers
before stumbling to the cracked, concrete
pad which served as a patio and succumbing
to the plague of the bottle.

In our last house on that base,
surrounded by my dark room of cinder
block walls, I felt like an old, Egyptian
man, who unaware of Pharaoh and Moses,
still tended his crop in the year of the locust.

Window Pains

Justin Lafreniere

From the window, the second-floor pane
broken by the rock that careened
undercover of dark minutes under midnight,
I watched them as they talked on the porch.
Their voices quiet, hushed and their system
Is grand-Copernican; my father's father alleges
And asserts all the wrongs of the world. This
family believes it has been wronged by the world.
The sun listens in as the son complains
about the time he spends in a dark classroom,
when he would much rather be in the bright lights
of a rave. Father and mother, arguing in the kitchen
about the price of their marriage and about how
neither listen to each other or the kids and they
never heard the story about the time his friend, the
one suspected of being a good kid, never comes over
anymore because he overdosed on the floor of the
basement of the church down the road. They never
find his needles, never notice that his room smells
like cocaine and pine trees and marijuana.

In one year, grandfather will fall. From this window,
land on the roof, roll to the ground. After the wake
we will have his funeral at All the Kings Men church,
down the road past the fork where my cousin's car
will spin out of control and leap for the drought-died
ravine. Father will begin his drinking, his mid-life crisis
bringing back the vices from when he was half
his current age. Mother will leave, off with a man she
met at my brother's funeral. Next month, his body
will overheat in the backseat of his ex-girlfriend's car
with the ecstasy of his narcotics. And this quiet little
girl, watching them on the porch swing, will be alone
to see the world through this window pain.

The Battle-Maid

Allison Mehaffey

A golden-haired maiden, a cousin of mine
Sat lost in a world of happier days,
Of woodland quests in the Land of the Jungle Gym,
Of treasures to find and castles to raise.

Then, peaceful rememberings rudely were shattered
By the sharp cry of the Telephone-bird
Pecking and clawing and cawing a warning.
She, falling back to Earth at the word.

I watched in silence as storm clouds, they fell
And strangled the sunshine of smiles on her face.
I, helpless, stood watching a battle approaching,
Unable to save her by taking her place.

My cousin, she heard the old conflict returning,
Saw it with eyes that glittered with fear.
But fear did not stop her from girding her armor.
She made fast her sword belt, no pause for despair.

No tears to spend on a union now shattered,
Now was the time to put hand to her shield.
Defending, once more, her stance of neutrality,
Between rulers each claiming an ally to wield.

A Weapon was all they could see, not a daughter.
Their sight of each other was equally dim.
Benevolent sovereigns corrupted by blindness,
In time, fiends emerged from both her and him.

Suddenly, out of the darkness they came,
Raging like dragons protecting their young.
Twin demons of love came there ripping and tearing!
Wild shrieks of loathing burst from their lungs.

The Battle-Maid parried, clashing with both of them
Tears gouging scar lines down her white cheek
"I'm just a child!" she screamed in her anguish.
But never permitted to rest or be weak

I wept prayers to heaven that angels would save her.
And yet I know she can never be free.
Fated, forever to be haunted by longing
For Phantoms of Family that never will be.

Calypso

Lauren DeReese

Who can say why we love, why we hate? There are many afflictions gods, nature and humans alike burden one another with. Who's to say who's right or wrong or what we shall do when the banks of the Styx finally reach the underworld. Will you tell your story to the ferryman? Will those that you love pay your fare? There are some things the gods cannot even remember.

My husband died at sea.
Drowning in the waters,
Swallowed whole.

I always thought I would drown in my own tears,
Slowly being swallowed by my despair.
I have not forgotten
That day
The sea and my heart ceased motion.
We died with him.

There has not been a storm since.
That day when the crash of waves,

The churning of waters,
Wail of wind,
Ghastly green skies,
All has ceased.

I didn't want him to leave,
I forgot he was mortal.

Hubris

Justin Lafreniere

Today would be the day that I escaped,
took a Pegasus about the celestial
ocean to the dark side of the moon.
I had meetings I needed to attend.

Crawling over the moon's cavernous earth,
I scoured the oxygen-free satellite
for the men I called associates, men
who I knew better than perhaps they knew
themselves. Yet I knew nothing of them.

Icarus sat, his mind in the clouds, spinning
a feather in weathered hands, thinking
of how uncontrollable life could be.
"Son," he said to me, though I am no child,
"Beware of pride, beware of glory, beware
of the folly of human spirit. Beware art,
science, deals offered, and wishes wished."
He said nothing of the sun.

Under an old tree on the sunless
crescent of darkness, I searched for my friends;

Faustus and Dorian. I found the fraternal
twins of greed, and so wise were their words.
"Heed me boy," Faustus spoke fast,
but Gray's painted voice took control,
"Never chase Apollo; he fears not even oblivion,
and has no appreciation for your wax wings."
They said nothing of art or science.

How forlorn I was, wandering across moonstone
pearled as Peter's gates. Perhaps my mind had wandered
home to where my body should have left.
"Come here, soul, speak with me awhile."
I saw no speaker, until the emerald face
of a large man peeked out from amidst the crater.
"Come speak and listen, learn to disregard,"
Plump and ugly, squatted like a potbelly pig,
an angel drifted closer on his divine wings.
"You should know this land and its lessons,
the faults that made me fall are the faults of my own."
Lucifer flashed his peculiar smile. "Challenge
not Providence, nor rely on yourself. To this moon
you came not on your own." With his plush
arm, he pushed, weight like a giant carnival prize
ramming me. I stumbled backwards,
and dropped into the Fall forewarned.

There is a Willow Grows Askant the Brook[1]

Justin Barker

They whispered of a Christian
burial—of whether salvation reaches
beneath fluid ambiguities sprinkled
with bloated petals.
And then they proceeded to undermine
the earth and sow her flesh to reap
violets, or so they say.

But our cold maids do dead men's fingers
call them[2] wrap around
her waist, anchoring her against the current.
Not so for the culprit—
severed at the socket from a somber

willow who watches
the once burden of her boughs
expanding into a labyrinth of organic
gossamer strands and synthetic
sheaths, motley in form, suspended
in the cradle of the brook—a conduction
of melodic murmurings composed
by the crow flowers, nettles, daisies, and long
purples[3] that play first string in her dirge.

And in the end, Gertrude sang
her lauds in accompaniment with Laertes'
incoherent clamor and the dull contact
of dirt and distended skin.
So they forgot about her plight
and drew swords.
For men's ears, choked
by poison, drown
the delicate invocations and spurn

faith, leaving nothing but a mound,
and the promise to erect
a monument upon the hour when blood
ceases to fertilize the earth.
And so she will wait—a casualty
of the madness of men and a perilous willow.

Hamlet by William Shakespeare—Act 4 scene 7 line 167 [1]
Hamlet by William Shakespeare—Act 4 scene 7 line 172 [2]
Hamlet by William Shakespeare—Act 4 scene 7 line 170 [3]

Still Friends

Sydney Zuerlein

The rivers bear the dead
You are not listening to the sea,
that never-satisfied Hades,
but the sun shines in the cold
and you check your email, and your gas tank
and their specters rise and, before they are reborn
over the earth,

you say something to me,
so intelligent it is unintelligible- almost
I finish my tea and my terrier, Snap,
finishes the oatmeal so we can walk
while I sit here-
past the cliffs to the water under the gray sky

Snap, is amid the tidal pools
I want to see you badly, but I cannot, you know,
he snuffs and splashes between the jaggedy rocks
where briny water is infested
with sea grass

I go to the top of this hillock, you go
to that and we wait for the downpour to come
at just the right moment,
the waves lap at Snap's belly fur
we roll down them and meet in the middle of
the little vale,

Snap leaps into my lap, chilling my legs with
the wetness of his muddy paws
we hold hands and dance together within the
circumference of the Fairy Ring
he leans his body cozy against my belly;
I warm a little, cradling him, kissing
him and he licks back

I give you an apple; you hold out to me a daisy
and I wonder
While we both sleep- I under the oak, you
beneath the blossoms of the cherry
Snap and I gaze out over the ocean, listening
to the wave's roar
content, the winter wind
salty in our nostrils- numinous

Ode to my Rock

Charissa Cumine

This belongs to my rock
Mischief is her name
Lord knows she deserves it
Mischief is always up to mischief
Especially when she's jealous.
Mischief adores me.
And I love her...
  Maybe I Don't
  Maybe I spent all my love on you.
  Maybe that's why she hurled herself at you
When she noticed you with the other woman.
Jealousy overtook her being.
She thought the woman was me, God forbid;
But she regained her senses quickly.
The second hit was her protecting me.
My rock protected my heart.

  I always thought you two would get along
  Apparently I was wrong.
She's everything you've ever asked for
Strong, silent, obedient

She never puts up a fight
She never talks back
She does what you ask
When you ask
And protects those she loves.
  Maybe the last quality is unfamiliar to you
  Protecting those who love you.
But you rejected her, and me.
But she is now my foundation
That I build myself upon.
Because of my rock
I am higher than you
I am a sky-scraper
I love my rock
But maybe, POSSIBLY,
  I still love you more

Valentine's Day Thoughts

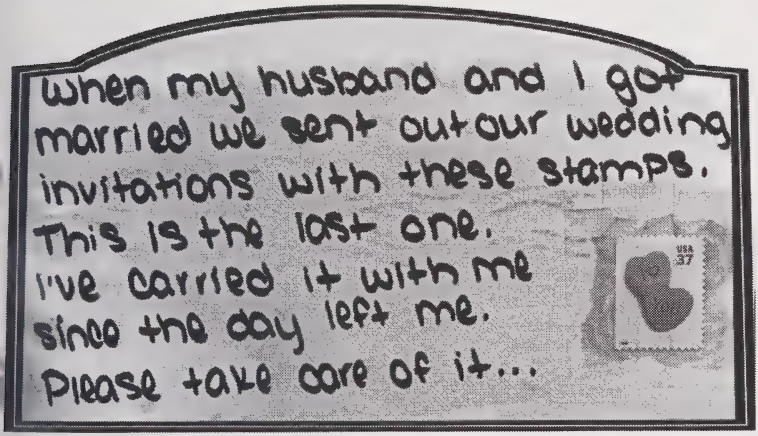
Natalie Weiner

A lone postage stamp sits in my hand.
Two happy hearts dance within its white frame
and remind me of the old, framed photographs
holding our two happy faces and a wedding cake.

Years ago, 75 of this stamp's brothers adorned invitations
and danced their way to mailboxes of family and friends
only to quickly meet their fates in 75 different garbage cans.
Not this one though, for it was ours: our two hearts dancing.

Today, the two happy hearts stare up at me
taunting my heart, now broken and alone.
Our last dance was years ago,
but today I'm ready to face the music.

I will send this stamp off on its way
and free my heart to dance again,
Alone and scarred
but beautiful.


When my husband and I got married we sent out our wedding invitations with these stamps. This is the last one. I've carried it with me since the day left me. Please take care of it...
USA .37

This poem was inspired by this postcard sent to **postsecret.com** on the week of 2/12/2006.

Ode to a Sonnet

Johnathan Pennington

I see you there, standing with a beauty that
transcends sentiments,
Perfect forms in perfect proportions, beyond simple
competence.
My grammatical Madonna, O majesty of diction!
Free these heretics from their formless conviction!

The beauty of a woman is admitted by all,
Yet in the realm of words, tolerance is our fall.
Fall from the Providence of stanza and verse,
To the empty coffin of modernity, our empty
verbal purse.

That satchel of wisdom, once full on your wrist,
Is now in the grasp of the free-writer's fist.
He grabs some words and throws them together,
Following a pattern lost to the nether.

O ye gorgeous goddess, lovely lady of loquacious
and elegant expression!
Bring us back to your reasonable judgment and
remove our shapeless impression.

I miss your forms, your glorious shapes, and timeless elegances,
Come back, make haste, and return us to our reasonable senses.

i am a laughing man.

T.S. Mullis

I am the laughing man.
the ape faced banana peeler of sneers and jeers,
gutter grinned friend of selfish sinners,

alone to laugh in the face of the serious,
maybe you've seen me,
dunce-capped, tongue-wagging in the cobwebbed
corners of classrooms,

or in the cadence of the china breaking chuckle
as the grandpa reads the funnies in his sunday paper,
i am the suppressed snickers of children
at overly depressed funerals,

i am the wiffle ball farts on the floor of the senate,
and the booger swinging like a trapeze artist from
the nose
of the ancient saddle bag preacher
perhaps you know me
me, the knock knock jokes told to sour faced crowds

who have heard it all before
me, the tramp, Charlie Chaplin,
who was really crying when no one was looking
me, the foreign man, Andy Kaufman,
the inter-gender wrestling champion of the world,
we miss you Andy.

so, what do i hope to say?
what message do i bring?
nothing,
absolutely nothing,
i only hope to make you laugh,
i only hope to make you smile for just a short while,
i am the laughing man.

Psyche

L.Brekke

Darkness was the only way to see you.
Light you forbade and with love I complied.
I spent my days in solitude,
longing for the flowers of the field
that I could bind up in your hair.
Your lover's touch I only felt
after slumber took me in his arms,
until you woke me
With a kiss upon my brow.
In the pitch I saw nothing,
only felt your tender caresses. But,
woman that I am,
I wanted to indulge my eyes with your form.

Curiosity prompted me
to hide the oil lamp and striking stone
underneath
our mountain of goose down pillows.
I feigned a gentle slumber, listening
To your breathing becoming slow,
rhythmic.

Like fly to honey I excitedly started my task
until a faint glimmer sparked, light
leaping
Over your still figure.

You are perfectly built,
a symphony of taut muscle and bone.
I drink your beauty like sweet summer wine.

I lean over you to see more, but
Clumsy,
I drip
hot oil on your golden shoulders.

Shocked howl, pulling away

You see me, know my transgressions,
flee our chambers,
with no love upon your lips.

Oh, my Lord, but to forgive this creature of a woman

I will put out my light forever,
I will Kneel at your mother's feet,
begging forgiveness,
if she would entreat you to return,
I will forsake the waking world for another night with you.

Poem #2

Sarah Smith

ake up
The sky is falling
The wind is screaming
The sun has taken leave
We're drifting apart now
So distant we are moving
And no one is listening
To the words we are bleeding

Trees abandon their fruit
Fruit loathe the trees
Manicured limbs
With rotting roots
Disown their own seeds
Bright colors
Won't mix together
Don't let them divide you

Do the birds sing
When no one pays attention
We seem to be sinking

We're drowning slowly
Homes in shambles
Throwing your junk on the lawn
Refusing to visit at Christmas
Pay your rent or leave

But Jimmy tells me
The leaves are falling
And there's a room
Full of candles
To light the way
Don't give up
On someday

Kaleidoscope

David Box

Looking into the face of a friend
Who can't look back
Through confusing eyes
And running-spun vision,

Who can fix this?

Surrounded by chaos,
But alone
(In wide open space.)

I was at the scene of the accident. Present.
And aware of all that transpired
But what of it is true?
Lost in the impossible information
There is only unwanted experience

My cries of "Breathe! Breathe!"
Are helping, I'm sure.
Maybe there is a chance
This will all go away,
Like it always does.
But the sirens' distant rings
And the calm maturity of those we've started awake

Are more than I can to comprehend.
And so,
I run.
Like a boy in the snow
Whose parents will know what to do,
And always keep watch.

But even they are not at the window,
And nobody pulls the wool from my eyes,
Says, "gotcha! What if this had been for real?
Lesson learned?"
I couldn't cry any more at his funeral..

The Little House

Carissa Orlando

When they bought that little house on the beach,
He must have known that he would escape.
He already knew that, one day,
He would rather take the sea into his mouth
Than kiss her one more time.
She must have known this too;
Or at least that's what she shrieked
When the heaving waters thrust his body ashore-
Engorged and blue.

The boats bumped the docks for years afterwards;
She refused to touch them.
Some said she was scared
But in fact, she loathed the waters
Which carelessly seduced her husband.
They thought she would flee when the
rains came,
But she refused;
She always knew the bitch would come
crawling back for her.
She was mistaken:
Fingers of waves grazed her thighs;
gusts of wind caressed her cheeks,

But the waters abandoned her,
A disinterested lover fleeing silently in the night,
And took the little house.

Wee Cup of Tea

Sydney Zuerlein

Three thousand years past,
A girl, perhaps someone rather like myself,
Sat upon a purple silk pillow
Sipping tea

Her slender fingers, white
Entwined stems of ivy with scarlet-tipped
finger-leaves,
Wrapped around the petite porcelain cup,
Waxing warmer, filled full with amber tea

Warmth crept up her arms,
Emerging like moonlight from midnight
Blue of sleeves, with flowers
Trailing around sleeves like fingers around a cup of tea

Steam wafted upward in evening
Upon the purple silk pillow atop the Oriental rug,
Thoughts drifted in her mind, curling into the air
From the richly woven day-tapestry
Where she sat,
Herself a cup of tea
The aroma lingered,
Drifting along the wind of thousands of years,
Waxed potent, again aroused

Heated water over crinkly, dusky-green leaves,
Held aloft over quilted stars adrift in a sea of silken blue,
Now a full, piping, smoking, cup of amber tea

Through a veil of tea-smoke I watch
My thoughts drift upward from the cup that is me,
The loose leaves of my life:
An infusion of tempest and tranquility

My fingers twined around the mug are burning
As I lift my tea out of the microwave- I wonder
If I am sacred-
Or Lipton

My Rug

Lindsay Full

Under my rug
lie remnants
of my pride leftover
from two-faced friends.

There lie the pinky promises and
high fives, the four hour
telephone conversations and
bellyaching laughter.

You can see the tear stained
pillows and slaps across
the face, the backstabbing
and scowls.

There lie girls screaming "bitch"
and "slut" and "whore," also the fat
jokes and glares that accompanied
me to prom.

I sweep it all under there
so no one else will see. Guests
come in commenting
on my wonderfully clean house.

When the Ocean Roars

Leslie Pitman

The ocean told me a secret today,
Of a world you and I don't know.
He told me I would never know it,
But I could imagine it, if I could.

I could, so I went (being led all the way),
To a familiar and peculiar place.
I am certain my breathing stopped
Upon arriving, but my chest heaved.

"There," he waved gently, and pointed.

"In This Place, you need no breath,
No drink, no life."

I asked him what I did need,
For surely there was something.

"Me."

But the wave crashed, and I…
I believe he had something else to say.

Journey through the Kitchen

Allison Mehaffey

I journey
Past thunderheads in heaps
Lying waiting to be washed.
Past beaches on wide windowsill,
White and clean
Where sunbeams rain
On green of violets
Gleaming in light of early morning.

A Secret Door, no telling!
Where Crayon's rainbows hide.
Then beneath is India
Ancient linoleum
Woven smooth across the floor.
I spy a paperclip!
No, only a crack
The Elephants march, I join them
Palms flat upon the tile
Hundred temple steps
Like magazines on countertops
Cluttering above.

I smell a snake approaching.
Cobra hunting in the forest
Of chair and table legs.

I draw a knife
Of pencil,
And quickly clamber up
Into the jungle canopy
To wait. Watching
For my foe.

Slithering slowly
He approaches.
One ear drooping,
Muzzle sniffing.
Furry for a cobra.
A breath.
I pounce!
But he escapes.

Native mothers celebrate
And bake a feast for me
Of cookies
I'm full
Of tickling giggles that will not stop
Till she makes me sleep.

Over the Precipice

Lindsey Shellhammer

Every now and then one gets trapped
in the net of disappointment-mixed-with-wishful-thinking
mixed-with-"that's just life."
Except by the time you realize you're on your ass
in the pit of the "oh shit," Dr. Seuss-concocted hole,
you've already toppled over the precipice
where you could have at least held
on to the cracks with your fingertips.
Granted, you'd then be dangling over the beaker
of brewing ruin, your legs flailing,
trying to keep the failure at its distance.
But the deadline for almost holding on passed days ago.
So then you rewind into the process of asking
yourself how you got this low again.
How you let this happen.
Stuck in the pothole of self-fury again.
And now it's about time for Self Pep Talk #2.
Doesn't work if the rest of you won't cooperate.
The mountain of life you left trailing has piled up too quickly
You're just behind everything.
Life. School. Work. Happiness.
Before the next due date you somehow are expected

to look past the mountain—call it hill,
rather—to the limitless sky.
And, without the sun blinding your eyes, climb upward.
Looking down, no plump, overstuffed pillows
to safely drift into—just smooth, straight drop
onto a flat, cement Earth.
So try not to look down as you're slowly worming
your way up.
And when the rest of the stress of life
you left behind
    catches   up   to you,
either let go and run faster,
(but what would that solve?)
or put it in your backpack, let it weigh you down,
and keep climbing.

Josephine

Justin Barker

nce, she learnt to delicately cross
her ankles and balance
her spine perpendicular to the ground
until her ribs grew tired of controlled
breathing constantly filtered
through stale lavender.

Her mother
bred her well from good Irish
stock and taught her grace
with the sign of the cross and daily trips
to the confessional, where she constructed
bawdy accounts that allowed
the priest an indulgence, or two.

And her sister, Virginia, married
some man with a crooked
conscious and a worthless disposition
outweighed by a heavy
wallet and wanton social graces
toward finer cuts of women.

Virginia found herself herded
into the City, leaving a sister who vowed
herself to the Carmelites, at least
for a few days—
longer than her first
marriage to a swaggering gentleman
whom she discovered enjoyed cramming
her face with fleshy knuckles.

She became an expatriate and amassed five
years of European affairs with French
women, and Italian men with insatiable
snarls at the ends of their lips,
and so she discovered a growth in her
belly which morphed into a figure
brandishing teeth, arms, hair—her only regret

came after she placed her daughter in
Virginia's arms and ventured
to the roof of her brownstone and
danced under the gaze of God,
and at the end of her performance, she blew
kisses to the crowd and bowed
into the accepting arms of the city below.

Essence

Natalie Weiner

My grandfather,
"big, strong, football man"
"scorer of touchdowns"
"defeater of Blue Devils"
"able to clear out bars with a single stare,"
now sits on a couch
resting in size sixteen slippers.
Trying to tackle getting up unassisted.
Unable to clear out fact from fiction in his head.

My grandfather,
"epitome of handsome"
"breaker of men's noses
and women's hearts"
"able to turn heads with no more than his six foot five shadow,"
now sits on a couch
age spots covering his thick skin.
Trying to flash a sly smile.
Unable to hide the wrinkles around his baby blues.

My grandfather,
"loud, and demanding"
"lyricist of tongue lashings"
"writer of witty retorts"
"able to cut down the tallest man with ten seconds of talk,"
now sits on a couch
his granddaughter at his side.
Trying to tell her of his pride in her.
Unable to voice his love.

"I'm glad you got to see me" comes out instead,
but what more can be expected?
He is, after all, just a "big, strong football man."
Crying is just not his style.

i wish i could have heard

T.S. Mullis

Wrinkled skin cracked and stretched
over his bones
pawpaw was 84 when he died,
and grammy,
you couldn't take care of yourself.

there was mold in the coffee
and on the blue bunny bread,
and grammy,
you couldn't make it to the bathroom.

upstairs smelled like pimento cheese
and bengay,
the trash was overflowing on the
kitchen floor,
and grammy,
you left the oven on.

so, i moved in
till we could find a nursing home
a quiet place for you (to die)
and grammy,
i wish i could have heard.

it was midnight
you had such a quiet voice
i was such a heavy sleeper,
you fell out of bed
broke a hip and arm
and grammy,
i couldn't hear you.

seven hours or more
you laid there and cried
while i never came to help
you must have thought i didn't care
i did
and grammy,
i wish i could have heard.

7:03 and i woke up
to the sound of your whimpering stutter
i entered your room and saw you laying there,
you looked up at me,
terror in your eyes,
i was so ashamed,
and grammy,
you thanked me and kissed me,
but grammy,
i wish i could have heard.

Beach

Hilary Armel

The days pass with clouds sparse
And allow the sun to cleanse the soul.
Her spirit is free and lively
Gulping up the sunshine and sea breeze.
Tan lines caress every sensous curve
And sand adorn her toes every day.
This life frees her from the controlling
Demands of people and time.
A black and pink bikini and a beach towel
Become her two new best friends and
Cloudy, cold days become her worst enemies.
She lives for this and loves her life
With boat drinks, sun and sand.

Sincerely Yours

Leslie Pitman

If i could write You a letter,
even if I could,
It would be frivolous and afraid

Of what is next—
Each sin,
Sentence, syntax,
Meaning something different from

the Last

Few days have entertained
Only ghosts of repetition
And haunted accusations.

If I look any deeper, the
abyss
Might swallow your pride and those
Damn clichéd lies.

Your letter, the one i would write to you—
Which I cannot—

Would be a defunct masterpiece
And its contents, a úsed whore.

Fiction

The Problems of Philosophy: A Tale of a Table
-Carissa Orlando

Philosophy…has at least the power of asking questions which increase the interest in the world, and show the strangeness and wonder lying just below the surface even in the commonest things of daily life.
--Bertrand Russell

The table hated Bertrand Russell.

Although never minding the occasional philosophical contemplation, the table had spent the first few years of its happy existence sitting mindlessly between a couch and a television, never hearing of the metaphysical theories of Russell. However, after having been an item in an exchange for a bag of weed, the table had been living with a young man who, after becoming substantially inebriated, would emerge naked from his bedroom after making love to his girlfriend and wax poetic about Russell's theories pertaining to the uncertainties of human knowledge.
It never took long before the table became infuriated.

"What Russell is saying," "the man would explain slowly to his girlfriend, staggering into the living room with nothing but a smoldering cigarette to distract from his rapidly shrinking manhood, "is that we have no way of knowing anything about that table."
"Is that so?" his girlfriend said. She had already heard this

drunken lecture many times before. She found Russell's teachings to be minimally stimulating and mostly crap, but she humored her boyfriend for reasons the table did not comprehend.

"For all I know," the man continued as his cigarette, acting as an extension of his pointing finger, rained ash on the table's smooth surface, "that table does not even exist. It could be merely a figment of my imagination."

The table fumed. It did not enjoy having its existence called into question.

"Of course the table exists," his girlfriend replied. "I can see it, you can see it, and if we called the neighbors over, they would see it as well." She tenderly brushed ashes off the table's surface. The table blushed. The woman always looked radiant after lovemaking and seemed to take on a bodily glow, unlike the man, who simply became limp and sticky. The table often wished that the woman would take it home with her, so it could see her daily instead of the man.

"Even if the neighbors do see the table," the man said, "the question simply becomes: Will the neighbors see the same table as I? I see a brown table; they might see a burnt red. I think the table is made of oak; they might think it to be cedar."

I'm cherry mahogany, you ass, the table thought.

"I am sure a carpenter would be able to sort out all disagreements," his girlfriend replied. She had taken a seat on a nearby sofa and was now rubbing her bare foot along the table's side. The table felt itself stiffen with ecstasy.

The man continued, not listening. "Also, who can say if the table remains in existence when we turn off the lights? Perhaps it disappears when it is not in our eyesight."

Actually, when the man turned the lights off, the table was left to sit alone in the dark. The table often wished the man would turn on the television so it would have something else to listen to besides the rhythmic creaking of the man's mattress, a sound that was beginning to make the table almost as furious as Bertrand Russell's theories.

"The number of times you've stubbed your toe on the table leg when the lights are off might signify otherwise," his girlfriend said, her grin sparkling. The table creaked in misery. Why was this wonderful woman subjecting herself to the ramblings of this sweaty idiot? If not for the fact that it was a table, the table would probably have long since stolen her away from the man. The futility of the table's situation made it ache in every grain of its wood.

With a sharp crackle of burning mahogany, the man extinguished his cigarette on the table's smooth surface. Before the table had time to recover from the sting, the man had lowered his large, naked rear end directly upon the table. The table's legs shook and it shuddered in a strong wave of disgust as it felt the man's thick sweat slide against its varnish. With the wet sound of sticky skin relocating, the man leaned forward and pointed directly at his girlfriend. "Bertrand Russell's theory of

knowledge is irrefutable. No argument you can give could possibly give a sound explanation that this stupid table actually exists."

The table had enough. It would rather take its chances with the wood chipper than spend another moment being insulted in this place of misery. With a scream of defiance, the table shuddered and split in two, sending splinters spraying through the air and heaving a large, jagged chip of wood directly into the man's left buttocks.

The man let out a shriek as he landed on the pile of the table's remains. He let out a string of profanities and wrapped his hand around the part of the table protruding, like a flagpole, from his ass.

"Don't touch it," his girlfriend instructed sharply, rising from the sofa to assist the man. "I'll drive you to the emergency room."

As the man crawled, whimpering and bleeding, back to the bedroom to find clothes he did not mind ruining, his girlfriend began to clean up pieces of the table. She was laughing.

"This is all the proof I'll ever need," she said to the table. "Of course you exist; you knew exactly the right thing to do just now!" She cleaned up the table's remnants and wiped off the blood as best she could.

The table had never been happier.

The Fairly True and Nearly Factual Account of an Event in the Life of Alfonso the Turtle
-Allison Mehaffey

Once upon a time in Mexico, there was a bright green sea turtle making his way down a dirt road in the middle of nowhere with a rucksack on his shell and a toothpick between his teeth. Technically, sea turtles don't have teeth; they do, however, have bone-encrusted jaws that serve nearly the same purpose. This sea turtle's name was Alfonso, and he was a very special sea turtle. Firstly, he was the only known sea turtle who had the ability to retract his head and flippers like a land turtle can. Secondly, Alfonso was studying to be a nuclear physicist by correspondence course.

Being such a special turtle, Alfonso definitely attracted some unwanted attention. In fact, he was currently on the run from a villainous orange cat who was trying to coerce him into helping her take over the world. Alfonso thought that taking over the world was unethical, so when he got wind of The Cat's plans for him he high tailed it to Central America to hide out for a while. Besides, Alfonso had been wanting to take a trip to Mexico anyway, it being the land of his birth.

As Alfonso made his way down the dirt road, he became aware of a cloud of dust in the distance that seemed to be gradually approaching. Alfonso felt a little anxious as he pondered what the cloud of dust might be, fearing it might be The Cat, but soon enough all his pondering was put to

rest as the source of the cloud of dust came into view. Alfonso was astonished to discover that the creator of the dust cloud was a large kangaroo.

"What in the world is a large kangaroo doing in Central America?" Alfonso wondered. Alfonso had never heard of kangaroos in Mexico. He had been quite certain that kangaroos were only found in Australia and several remote locations in central Africa. Alfonso was, in fact, so astonished that he stopped walking and his toothpick fell out of his mouth. Alfonso stood in the middle of the road, waiting somewhat patiently, until the kangaroo came to an abrupt and bounding halt before him.

"Allo, mate," said the kangaroo in a deep and jovial voice. "I must say I am swoggled at the sight o' you. Fancy! A sea turtle walking as plain as day down the middle of a dirt road in Mexico! Blimey!"

Alfonso sniffed indignantly before replying. "Technically I am not 'walking' I am 'flapping' down this road." He held up his right forelimb, "This is a flipper, and flippers flap!" He lowered his flipper. "Furthermore, I have every right to be equally surprised at seeing you here. What is a kangaroo doing in Mexico?"

"Oh! I'm on holiday!" the kangaroo replied, energetically thumping his tail. "I didn't mean any disrespect when I said you were walking. I am awfully pleased to meet you Mr. Turtle. My name is Leroy! What's yours?"

"Alfonso," replied Alfonso.

"Hey! You can't be the Alfonso, can you? The nuclear physicist?!"

"Well, I'm not quite a nuclear physicist yet. I still haven't finished my correspondence course…"
Leroy began bouncing on his toes excitedly, "Well, blimey! I'm swoggled! I just loved reading that essay you wrote on particle fission! That changed my life, that did!"
Alfonso blushed modestly, "Well. I'm very flattered. It's very nice to meet you Leroy."
"Hey, mate! Why do we go down to the village and find a pub so we can…."

But Alfonso never found out what Leroy wanted to do at the pub, because just at that moment, The Cat herself jumped out from behind a bush holding a pistol.
"Not so fast! You may be a clever turtle, Alfonso, but thinking you could hide from me was not so clever." The Cat's orange fur seemed to spark with anger as she laughed rather maniacally. She pulled out a walkie-talkie and spoke into it. "All right Tom! I've got'em! Bring the helicopter around pronto!"
Leroy shot a fearful glance at Alfonso and mouthed the words "What do we do?"
"NO TALKING!" The Cat yowled, her green eyes glittering insanely. "The Kangaroo will have to come with us. We can't have him running to the police to rat us out, can we?"
The Cat began talking into her radio again, giving Tom the helicopter pilot directions.
Alfonso had been racking his brain; trying to think of something he could do to help them escape. Suddenly an idea came to him. Ducking down into his shell, and using only toothpicks, a paperclip, a magnifying glass, blue jello

and a cactus, Alfonso assembled a simple ray gun. He could hear the helicopter landing and The Cat screeching at him to come out of his shell. Setting his gun to stun rather than kill, Alfonso took a deep breath and popped up out of his shell to fire a single shot straight into The Cat's chest, making her slump to ground unconscious. He fired one more stunning shot at Tom the pilot before slipping his ray gun back into his shell.

"So, Leroy. Why don't we walk down to that village, and on our way to the pub, we can tell the local authorities where they can come to bag these crooks."

Leroy looked astonished as they began making their way towards the village. A few minutes of silence passed before he spoke. He sounded genuinely impressed when he said, "I must say! That was quite some show. You did some mighty quick thinkin' back there."

"Well," Alfonso began modestly, "I have to deal with criminal masterminds trying to take over the world more often than you'd think."

"Wow! Sounds thrilling! I've always wished that exciting stuff like that would happen to me. This is the first time it actually has, though."

"Well, I'm sure that it won't be the last time something exciting happens to you, especially if you keep on hanging around with me."

Leroy grinned as only kangaroos can, "I certainly hope you're right, mate."

Alfonso laughed heartily as he and Leroy continued on their way down the road into a magnificent golden sunset.

You may be pleased to hear that the adventures of these

unlikely friends do not end here. In fact, not long after the defeat of The Cat, Alfonso, with a little help from Leroy, saves the Australian prime minister from an army of diabolical, power-hungry penguins invading from central Asia.
But that's another story.

A Healthy Nut Crunching
-Sydney Zuerlein

"Chop, chop, chop" said the cold knife to the carrots and celery.

"Plink, plink, plink," said the celery and carrots to the stainless steel colander as they were dumped atop its cache of organically-grown vegetables. "They say that this is the first generation in America's history that will not outlive their parents," she said to Skittles, the yellow lab who was supervising dinner's preparation, as he did faithfully night after night.

"I would willingly fix them salads," she continued to the dog, "but that husband of mine and those offspring of ours will have all their dinners be high-calorie, high-cholesterol, high-sugar, high-sodium, and swimming in sauce!"

She stopped to tie back the fine, fluffy, light brown locks that may have had ten gray hairs all tolled, though she tenaciously hid them with an eco-friendly, hemp-based dye. She adjusted the heat of the boiling baby carrots, the only vegetable besides cooked broccoli drenched in Velveeta that her youngest, Charlie, would eat. She finished dumping the seasonings for her vinaigrette into the sleek, silver blender. Hitting the

"Puree" button, she stooped to ascertain the progress of the Tater Tot casserole in the oven.

"Mom, you wanna guess what happened in PE today?" asked Zak from the kitchen doorway.

The blender whirred obnoxiously, the oven door creaked, Skittles replied with an over-the-shoulder glance and a courteous wag of the tail. Zak shrugged the bony shoulders of his thirteen-year-old frame, flicked his punk bangs out of his eyes, and wandered off down the hall to see whether or not nine-year-old Steven was beating the bloody game he was playing on the family computer.

The scent of garlic, balsamic vinegar, and rich olive oil filled her nostrils as she sprinkled a few flaxseeds to complete her colorful salad. She stepped over Skittles and hollered down the hall that dinner was hot and ready.

Her husband said a blessing before the three children began guzzling their chocolate milk and digging into the mountains of casserole that rose from their plates.

"Crunch, cruch, cruch," said the cucumber and carrot inside of her mouth.

He was smiling and saying something, that husband of hers. "Crunch" was all she heard inside of her head so she just smiled and nodded and blinked across the table as she scrutinized the wrinkles that were beginning to form around his mouth and eyes. If only he'd let me give him a weekly facial with my avocado-yogurt cream and oatmeal scrub, she thought. She gave herself a facial twice a week and her skin fairly glowed as years melted away.

She shoveled another luscious forkful of fresh spinach and broccoli sprouts into her mouth.

"Mommy, you have something green in your teeth!" said Steven, looking at her with his large gray eyes, a shock of shaggy, blonde hair hanging nearly to the rims of his glasses.

"I think that was supposed to be funny," said Zak, but only his father heard.

"Crunch, crunch, gulp," she smiled.

"Can I have summore chocolate milk, mommy?" asked Charlie.

"What do you say first?" said his father as he got up to grant Charlie's request.

The boy said, "Please."

She grinned at her husband through a mouthful of tomatoes and lettuce.

Zak finished his food and went to go do homework, but that really meant that he would be text messaging Sara, his seventh-grade sweet heart.

Steven returned to his computer game, and her husband returned to the power-point he was completing for tomorrow's presentation.

Little Charlie stood on one foot and worried his lip as he watched his mother dump the rest of his food into Skittle's bowl before he scampered off to finish the cartoon he'd been watching before dinner.

She put away the left-overs, loaded the dishwasher, and wiped off the counters.

In the bedroom, she spread out her red mat and lay down on it and Skittles came to kiss her face and lay down beside her. She sent him away and shut the door.

She began her pm yoga routine, relaxing first her body

then her mind, skillfully sketching a mental picture: she sat on the bank of a wide river in the sunset, as her thoughts began to flow, she saw herself put them into the river that they might drift away with the current.

Dreams of Hell
-Justin Lafreniere

There is something in the dark. Like a silent wisp of smoke, the unknown fiend faded out in and out of sight, moving through the black air before vanishing, until it reappeared closer a split second later. Closer and closer it comes. Closer. Just feet away.

I could reach out and touch it, but I still cannot see what it is. My eves become cameras, out of focus, broken and blurry.

I cannot see the approaching shape.

What is it? Should I run? I do not know. I am running out of time to decide. It. continues its determined advance. Is it an animal? Is it a ghost? It could be anything. It could be a dream. It could be the imagination corrupting the senses, with faith overtaking reason.

Suddenly it is clear. It is me. It is not me. It is something indescribable and frightening and intimidating and I am terrified of myself and the falsehood of myself. I am afraid of me and what is before me. I am afraid. My trepidation and panic stops me from moving as my other body reaches out and shoves me, pushes me back with a massive, inhuman strength.

I stumble back, my balance shaking until my feet can no longer find the floor. Then I begin to fall. There is no floor. I continue to fall, down and down into a pit of oblivion; everything vanishes, and I am all alone, plummeting through the air. Falling. Head over heels, the worst manner of dropping, sinking through the air in sickening silence. It is impossible to tell if I am rising or falling; all that I know is that there is no ground, that there is no sky. There is a purgatory of space.

There is something. For an instant, a millionth of a heartbeat, it is below me. Then it is above me, surrounding me. Cold. Icy water, red as blood surrounds my head. Struggle in the deep, dark waters, attempt to find which way in the surface, which way is salvation. A light appears to hold the answer. but it could be a falsehood, a lie, and send me permanently into the depths, never to see the real radiance of life again. Still I swim on, struggling towards the glow that bleeds through the ruby water. Reaching, hands extended as a beggar would for change, I reach the surface, and find air. The sudden exposure from the water is chilling, and my weak body sinks back towards thc bottom of the river.

Struggling, thrashing in the water, I weakly call out to the looming approaching shape, screaming for the ferryman to save me. I call for him; Phlegyas, steer your raft this way'

I grab the oar he offers, lunge for the gaunt skeletal hand. I pull my dying soul on to the vessel. I am saved from

Styx, on a sanctuary from the hellish river. No words are exchanged. He stirs the torrent with his oar, beginning to push through the crimson water. He sculls through the stream of souls, pushing them under his ship with inhuman brutality. He says nothing. He stops. A skinless finger, the bone of the exposed digit points to the marsh; I shake my head. Fear overtakes me again. This ship is not safe but I do not wish to risk the lands of the underworld. I do not wish to move. In unholy anger, he reaches out for me, grabbing my throat, clutching tight, strangling me before he drops me into the foggy, misty, infernal bog. The reeds are tongues of fire, licking up for flesh like serpents hunting their prey. They slither in the air. I do not move, for fear of attracting death.

From behind, another rough hand, cold from cons in a tomb, grabs me, catching my neck. I am drawn in by another ferryman. He has no face, only a skull, bits of bone missing from centuries of work, and a piercing glare that sends waves of terror through my body. He extends a hand, looking for his gift. I do not have Charon's toll. He glares at me, and I feel my soul collapse, break into a billion little pieces, more numerable than the stars. Each shard is tossed into the wind, to fade into oblivion, to leave forever. He takes me to the banks of the Acheron and leaves me there. I do not want to become a wanderer. Was not my soul worth two coins? Was it worth nothing to him? I refuse to drift among these ashen black sands, this barren landscape. Finding another in my

purgatory, I send him as a messenger, as my Hermes. To Minos and Hades, I bid him to go. Tell them I wish an audience, I wish a conference on the fate of my soul, on the providence of my heart and body and mind.

A session with the devil, a meeting with Pluto is granted. He offers me Zaqqum, offers me a price for my soul. Do I refuse? Do I believe I have the power to decline an eternity Jahannam? I tell him my soul is mine, and I wish to keep it. I tell him I will be crucified before I submit to this Hell, that I will die a thousand deaths before I willingly venture into Gehenna and stay there for the end of times. Hades laughs. He sends for Minos. I am guilty of no crime. I am sentenced to death. I am drowned in Styx, put in the river of blood. My world is red and dark. It fades into black.

My world springs to life. It is full of color, of vibrant shades, of life. From my dreams, I escaped. From hell, I was released ...

Writing in Cars
-Leslie Pitman

We used to play this game on the way to school every morning. She would pick a car, and I would start the story. On good days, we'd have one narrative going the entire 45-minute drive. Sometimes, slower days, we would get through three or four. Her favorites were the soccer mom in the mini-vans jam-packed with ten-year-olds. "What kind of elementary school starts at seven o'clock in the

morning?" I would say to myself. My favorites were the business fathers—briefcase in the front seat, "Baby on Board" sun screen on the back window, but no child in sight. I had some good stories about those guys. Funny, too.

They were always funny. Melissa and I have senses of humor that, alone, are cold and dry. But together, they form a type of sympathetic wit that, I would argue, is equal to that of Jane Austen plus David Sedaris. This combination describes us, really. She's a literary genius, a feminist at heart—though she'd never admit it because she likes the conversational company of men too much, and a passionate lover of life. I face my future fears and regretful past with comedy, learn daily from my mistakes and have a burning desire to share them with others so they don't make the same ones, and find solace in acceptance but enjoy being different.

Our parents, remarkably, are a blend of the two. A little bit of both, they each are. It should be the other way around—that Mom is like Austen, Dad is like Sedaris, and Melissa and I emerged two perfectly boxed cake mixes of our parents' personalities. But our family is always doing things backwards. Like spending Thanksgiving Day feeding the homeless instead of taking family photos and cooking a turkey. Or buying tickets for Disney World, and then deciding half way there that we want to go to Universal Studios instead; but it doesn't matter because Mom left the tickets on the kitchen counter. Or skipping out on the newest cousin's christening

ceremony to go to a Dave Matthews Band concert four hours away. Or leaving this dying earth before we, Melissa and I, even understood what the hell it means to live.

Mom didn't mean to go. And if she had had a choice, she probably would have waited a while—seen us grow up a bit more, even though we feel like there's little of that left to do. But time, or God, or fate, or that big black massive sky had alternative—backwards—plans for her that even I don't understand. It took her away from all of us in an instant. For three years, we waited for it, planned for it, and anticipated it. But none of us actually expected it. Except for Haley, Mom's sister. She was always objective, never idealistic, constantly trying to tell us how it would be. We didn't listen. It didn't matter. Mom mattered, now mattered, what was going to happen didn't.

Until it happened. And then it mattered.

"Shit" was all I could really say. Nothing could have prepared me for that moment when Mom died. Not even that stupid fucking counselor at the school, or the therapist at the hospital, or my reality-slapped aunt. I spent three years knowing that every night Mom went to sleep and I kissed her goodnight on the head—the one that used to be filled with full and glossy blonde hair—may be the last one. And every night, and every morning, I told her I loved her. But then I would go out on Friday night and pretend like I was invincible, like life had no limit, and forget about everything painful. In these moments, my most

vulnerable ones, Mom was fine and I was the one who needed saving. And that, somehow, made me feel better about myself.

Then she was gone. And I would take every one of those wild, ridiculous nights back and give them to my mother. I would rather have spent every one of her last moments with her than with my friends who saw life as an opportunity to screw up in every way possible. With a dying mother, I should have been able to see beyond this, beyond the moment—and I did, when I was with her. But without her, I lost focus, because sometimes that was just easier. Feeling was a lot more difficult than it is in the movies.

Melissa, unlike me in many ways—two obvious ones being that she was younger (and in many ways, that made her more aware and more mature) and a female—recognized with opportunity what I realized with regret. Granted, she missed out of much of her high school experience, because she chose Mom over friends many times. But the rewards of her devotion to her mother—the one who nurtured her into the young woman she is today—are evident. Not only did she watch Mom go with a peace in her heart, but she had real relationship with real people. The few friends that she did have in high school will be a part of the rest of her life, because they were there for her in the worst. I would rather have shown Mom how much I love her and had no friends than spent my time the way I did—making friends with people who have already forgotten me, two years after

graduation. Melissa did it right, and I am still learning from her.

Melissa and I have been talking about this drive—the one where I take her to college—since the summer before her senior year. In our perfect world, we were going to ride up together, a type of replaying of our high school years when I would drive us every morning. We'd spend one day in Nashville by ourselves, exploring like college kids, and then Mom and Dad would meet us up there to help her move in. But Dad thought it best we go alone now; he said it would be good for us, and he needed some time alone—to think.

So here we are: driving to school again. This time to Vanderbilt, where my little sister will live for the next four years. She's doing what I never gave myself the chance to do, and I couldn't be prouder of her for not following in my footsteps. There's a tragedy in an older brother saying that, but I'm being honest here, and that's the truth. I thought I had it bad two years ago, because I had a sick mom; that was my excuse for not going to college. Now I'm watching my sister go to college with a dead mom, and the head she has on her shoulders is ten times stronger than mine will ever be.

Melissa is going to have a great story.

"What about that one, Lissa?" I say, pointing to the black Mercedes beside us. She blinks in the break of the silence, and turns to look out the window.

"A man. Mid-thirties. Works all day. Going on a business"

"There's a kid in the back."

"Oh. Rewind." She clears her

throat. "A man. Mid-thirties. Married. Usually works all day, but his wife had to go in today. To the doctor. She has her first chemo treatment. So he's got the kid. And he's taking her to the zoo. He would rather be with his wife, but the daughter, she's only three, needs a parent. And he's the logical choice."

I chuckle at her wit amidst the pain.

"Sorry. Funny isn't much of an option today." She shrugs, turns her head away from the window, and reaches in her bag for her book."

"Hey. It's okay. You're allowed to be funny. Mom would want you to be."

"Oh, I know. But seeing you laugh reminds me too much of her."

I attempt to reply, but a huge SUV cuts me off mid-thought, and I shout "Fucker" instead.

Melissa flinches and closes her eyes.

"Hunter."

"What?" I snap, irritated.

"Maybe she just lost her husband to another woman, and she has a screaming infant with an ear infection in the front seat, and a five-year-old who is late for soccer practice at home. And her mom fell and broke her hip yesterday, so she made dinner for her but had to buy McDonald's for the family. Her brother just called and wants her to come up north for Christmas because he's going to Europe with his girlfriend for New Year's and doesn't know when he'll be back. And she just gave herself a paper cut while trying to open her day timer and drive at the same time. And she's really sorry she cut you off—she didn't even see you there.

Her baby was crying, and you were in her blind spot."

I wish that I could stare at her, at my amazing little sister who, although two years less experienced in life than me, gets it all so much better than I can ever hope to. Mom died, and all I can think about is how I never did enough, how I wasn't good enough, how I failed. Mom died, and all Melissa thinks about is other people. Her perspective has completely changed; she thinks like Mom spent her last three years thinking. Life cannot be all about me, or even all about you. It must be about the person beside you, or the one who just pulled out in front of you on the highway. Because they've got living to do too, and your life is no better or worse than theirs. It's life, and we're all in it. And sooner or later, it's going to get snatched away. And we're going to wonder whether we really lived it or not. And my sister, the little one, is going to be able to say that she did. Because she made her life about everyone else's life and not about her own.

"What's your story, Hunter? I bet they're telling it right now," she says with a smile, and looks toward the car to the right of us. Two kids, not unlike her and me, probably a brother and a sister, laughing with the windows rolled down and the music turned up.

"You're writing it for me right now, Sis."

Melissa sighs, leans over, and kisses me on the cheek. Our ride to Tennessee is only halfway over, I think. There's time for three good stories, at least. "Okay. Got one. Purple pick-up, right lane, afro."

"An ex-priest and ex-convict, Purple Pick-Up is on his way to Alabama where he will be attending swine fest..."

Creative Nonfiction

The Tenured Fool and an Antidote for Arrogance
-Justin Lafreniere

Passing over the threshold and into the room feels strange; there is the illusion that the office is senescent, decaying at a rate different from the rest of the world. Perhaps the sepia color scheme coaxes you into believing in the antiquated aura; or it could be the chaotic and messy organization of the room. On the wall opposite the door, brown bookshelves hold an armada of videotapes, an outdated technology aging the room; series of books line more of the shelves, shielding the white walls from view. The room teems with culture. With a quick glance back to the boring hallway, I see the white door branded with a "South Park" bumper sticker, a testament to a love for satire. In contrast, the complete works of The Faerie Queen sit tucked quietly away, set dejectedly off in the corner. Next to the Dell computer looms a bust of William Shakespeare. A fleeting look around the room is like looking at a fading photograph; if one concentrates, you can almost see the proprietor's face emerge. The office reflects the owner, a man who seems to suffer from an artistic multiple personality disorder. Dr. Richard Goode-Queens University of Charlotte' s Professor of pop culture and film, as well as medieval and Renaissance

literature-has the youthful mirth of a comic and the worn amiability of age and Southern hospitality. His white beard and glasses suggest what Santa Claus would look like if the North Pole was outsourced to Texas. His face glows with rosy cheeks, and he decorates it with a wry smile and eyes that flicker with youth, incongruous under the balding head. Like the room, he dresses himself to a brown color scheme, with hues slipping from desert tan to auburn coffee. His pedagogical and grandfatherly appearance makes him immediately likeable.

If the aesthetic of the man is merely comfortable, the personality is well worn. The chronic smirk betrays his wit, showing that a failure to tread carefully is likely to fall victim to one of his impromptu barbs. And the professor renowned as a comedian admits he tries to be funny, but he excuses himself, since "Life can get you down, man." He finds humor vital-for an individual and a society. It lightens the tone to make life bearable. Every few years, he teaches a course on satire because he knows that sometimes one must be funny and critical and needs "a guise that can make it allowable." The comedy is unvarying, but there is also discretion that comes out in glimpses, balancing the humor. A self-censoring makes him chuckle with the warmth of the unsaid punch line, leaving the audience standing miserably out in the cold. The censorship is mildly ironic-he mentions

offhandedly, "Nothing will get me fired—I'm too close to retirement." Still, he holds himself back, just slightly. No amusement is lost in the conversation, just edited to Nickelodeon instead of HBO.

Mentioning television can be a dangerous distraction. It is not to say that the tangents, fairly frequent, are not interesting, and often funny. It is more that there is too much Dr. Goode has to say, too many ideas crawling through his brain, fighting for airtime like television's reality show stars. The professor, though in his sixties, admits to watching "South Park" and getting his news partially from the "Daily Show" and "Colbert Report"; he reads the "Onion" as well as the Charlotte Observer and still reminisces about "M.A.S.H." The scholar who wrote his dissertation on The Faerie Queen seems to have seen every film and show you could name-and some you couldn't.

But he denies the allegation, proudly countering that he has "never watched the Golf Channel," and alludes that he may be a better man for it. Literature is more dangerous, a tightrope walk past Charybdis, where the whirlpool of Goode's knowledge could ruthlessly suck in the unwary. He talks about poetry, from Caedmon to Shakespeare and Donne to T.S. Elliot, leaping through centuries of work. Being in one of his classes, I mention how much of the poetry contains sexual themes and prod whether it is the style of the era or his design. The eyes flicker with humor, and his mind whirls through various

explanations for a moment. In a hasty justification, he cites how there were more works, in which excessively religious themes contaminated the literature and spread a plague of boredom to the reader. Then he pauses; he admits with a laugh that the choices are partially his. But there is a reason: Dr. Goode wants to know his students. He picks topics he finds are interesting, so that they'll open up. He is trying not to be an old "fuddy-duddy." He wants to relate, to create a repartee of ideas, so that students don't sit there staring blankly at textbooks, so that they actively pursue the knowledge. When students do this, and find success, he knows he has done his job. He speaks fondly of times past pupils have contacted him after they have graduated. The intimate nature of a tiny school is one of the reasons he left his original teaching position at the University of Tennessee, where the classes were too large and impersonal.

Queens, the small liberal arts college, is Goode's home. He feels almost brotherly ties with two other professors, Dr. Charles Reed and Dr. Robert Whalen; they seem akin to three musketeers—if the trio dropped swords and brandished pens. The friendship is slightly eccentric. Dr. Whalen has traveled all over the world with Goode—maybe Lone Star Father Christmas was delivering cowboy boots to good little boys and girls?

Actually, the two have collaborated and done research on several books, largely in the Philippines.

Whalen also notes that Goode runs a betting ring with the faculty on when exactly the Spring Convocation ceremony will end—or did until a local paper uncovered it after then-Bank of America Chairman and CEO Hugh McCall won $5.75—the year he retired. Dr. Reed and Dr. Goode, however, are the more peculiar combination. They spend more time arguing on North Carolina versus Texas barbeque than much else. Often conversations start with an insult towards one of the cooking styles—most recently, Goode claimed that Reed's barbeque uses pigs, the animal possessed by the biblical demon Legion, and is, therefore, unholy. And while discussing his aversion to modern music, he admits that a wholly terrifying combination would be Mick Jagger's lips smeared in Dr. Reed's barbecue sauce. The two will bicker, but at the end of the day, both understand it is just food. To Goode, it seems more important that Dr. Reed "likes to drink beer like I do."

Behind the humor of Goode is something special. More humor. The kind of humor that is funny when he is not trying to be, the kind of funny that can explain anything, the kind of funny that most people just don't have. He can be self-dep reciating and understands that making fun of himself is fun. When asked for something reflective, he candidly responds, "Oh gosh, I'm not very profound." Still he tries, because doing so means connecting with a student, and that is important

to him. He thinks for a minute. It is as if little clerks in his head are carefully fingering through a filing cabinet of quotes and ideas, looking for the perfect one. "Teaching is God's gift for arrogance." He pauses, and the air fills with the weight of guilt, before admitting. "I just made that up." Still thinking, he strokes his white beard, as if a great quote will just pop out of the snowflake hair. In his hand, he innocently turns his "11 K A" fraternity paddle, as if threatening a saying to spring from his tongue before he relives his day as "Hell Master" and hazes the idea. Then, it comes to him: teaching. knowledge, laughter are all the "antidotes for arrogance."

Goode takes pride being the antidote, dispelling the arrogance from students as they separate themselves from their teenage years and move towards the working world. Within those jovial eyes, it is easy to understand why Goode won an award as the "North Carolina Professor of the Year" back in 1994. He is a fool and an eccentric and a scholar-and once more a fool. He is comical and whimsical and wise and witty, enough of a childish adult to relate to the students and retain his tenure. And Goode knows this. As he runs through the amateur philosophical musings of a joker, he explains that "Teaching is the last refuge of a scoundrel and the highest calling of a prankster—they trick the students into knowledge, into the awareness of their own ignorance, while providing a

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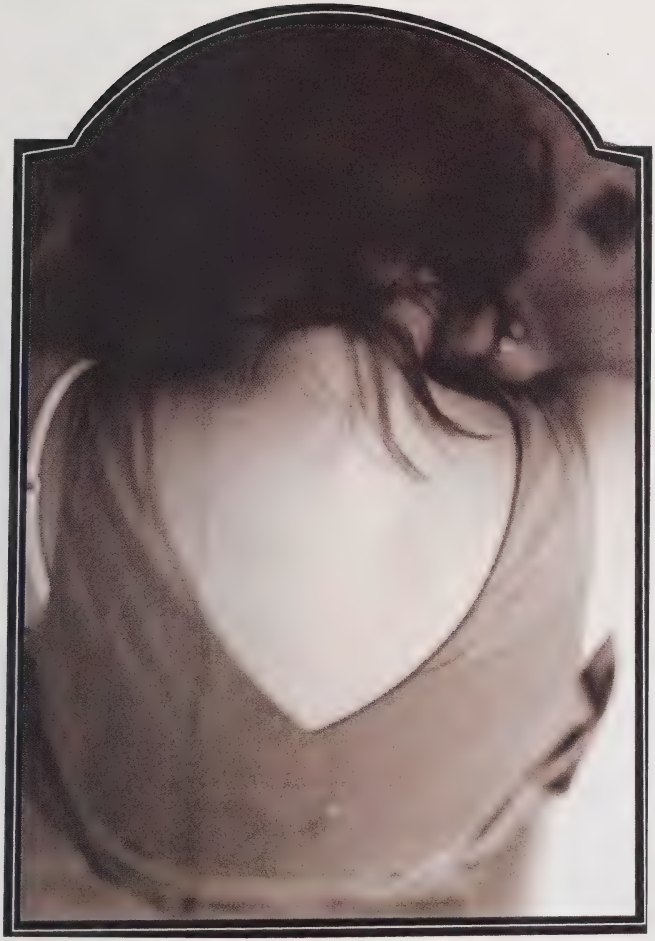

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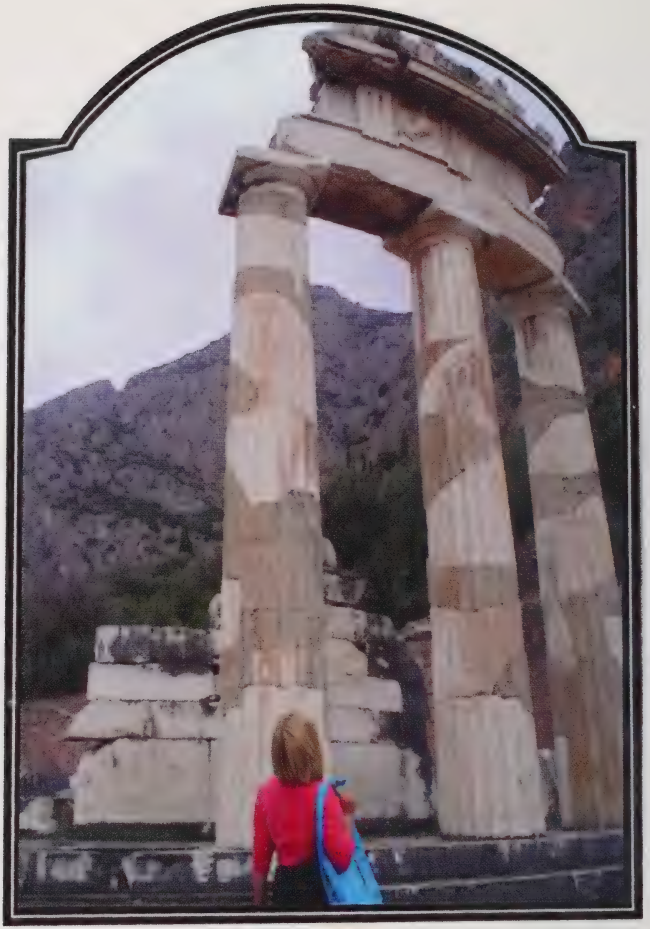

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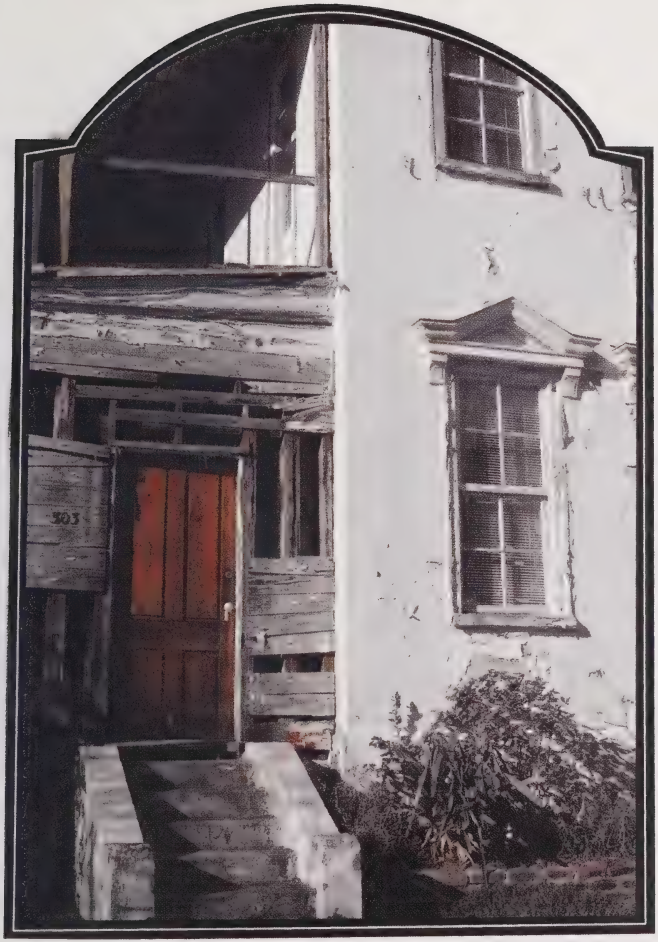

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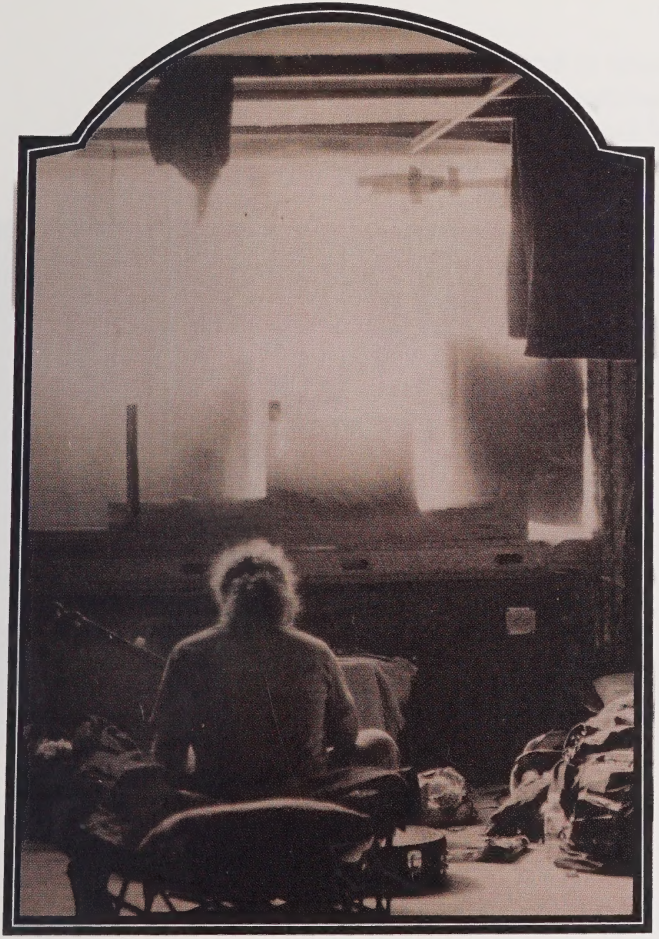

Marda Luger

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modeling their awareness
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From the editors...

You've got the write stuff!

queens